

Frustration rampant over Loop 202

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The Arizona Department of Transportation decided not to provide an update on the status of the South Mountain Loop 202 Freeway for Lakewood residents, so it wasn't much of a surprise that people packed the Ahwatukee Foothills Village Planning Committee's meeting to hear the same briefing.

And what they heard didn't set well with many people.

Some were concerned that the freeway would lead to more crime, others that it should be built below ground level to lessen the visual impact, and still others that the price of gasoline would be so high in 30 years that hardly anyone would use the freeway that is now projected to cost \$1.7 billion.

But, most of all, people seemed frustrated at the glacial pace of deciding if the freeway will even be built.

"There are things I'd like to do to my home, but why should I put \$5,000 into my house if it's going to get bulldozed?" asked J.D. Allred. "There are a heck of a lot of people who would like to make a decision and they can't."

According to ADOT spokesman Tim Tait, an updated draft of the environmental impact report is hung up over discussions on South Mountain, which the Gila River Indian Community considers a traditional cultural property.

"The mountain is sacred," Tait said, "but we can't build the freeway without impacting the mountain."

Tait said he wouldn't guess on when the issue would be resolved or the report completed other than to say it probably wouldn't be this year.

Even if the plan were approved quickly, Tait said it would still take until 2012 before construction could begin.

Design changes impact trust

Delays and uncertainty have created frustration and distrust around the freeway planning process.

The Village Planning Committee has voted twice opposing construction on Pecos Road and Councilman Greg Stanton has said that ADOT would build it on Pecos Road "over his dead body."

Originally designed in 1985, the freeway was planned to connect Interstate 10 in Ahwatukee Foothills and run through South Mountain Park then north to reconnect with I-10 around 55th Avenue.

In 2001, ADOT decided to update the old plan to take into account growth and development in the area.

One point of contention is that the original freeway plan called for six lanes, but since then the standard was changed to 10 lanes. That means homes that were away from the freeway when built are now in the right of way and homeowners who exercised due diligence before buying now face the prospect of a sound wall in front of their home instead of a view.

Two years ago, the estimate was 255 homes would have to be demolished to make way for the freeway, but that number has since grown to 317.

The Lakewood development was approved before the freeway and will be impacted more than most developments along Pecos Road if construction is approved.

Some issues include how an above-ground freeway will visually impact the community, if wells owned by the HOA and used for the lakes can be moved out of the freeway's path and how the loss of homes and HOA dues will impact the association.

This made ADOT's refusal to discuss the freeway status even more frustrating for Lakewood residents.

Tait said that with little new to report, instead of speaking directly with Lakewood residents, ADOT would focus its attention on the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team meetings.

But John Rodriguez, a member of the Citizens Advisory Team representing Lakewood, said that there is new information that Lakewood homeowners would like to hear, including reports on the wells and construction profile options.

Profile options

A major concern for some Village Planning Committee members was the profile decision to build the freeway at ground level.

"If you chose above ground it will ruin property values," said Blanch Prokes, a Village Planning Committee member and manager of the Lakewood Homeowners Association.

ADOT's argument was that depressing the freeway would require massive water retention areas and pumps on the north side, taking out an additional 500 homes above the 317 now needed for the freeway.

Village Planning Committee member Paul Everett asked why they didn't consider something simple like small aqueducts running over the freeway to carry runoff water.

"The Romans did it 2,000 years ago," Everett said.

Ben Spargo of the engineering firm HDR, which has provided technical support for the draft environmental impact statement, said that it could cause other problems but that he would look into it.

According to officials, once the draft environmental impact statement is approved there will be at least 45 days for people to comment before the information is taken and a final environmental impact statement is written.

It will then be up to ADOT and the Federal Highway Administration to decide if the freeway is built.

At that point the Maricopa Association of Governments, made up of representatives from the Valley's cities and Indian tribes, will vote to fund or not fund the project.

For more information on the South Mountain Loop 202 Freeway, visit www.azdot.gov/valleyfreeways or call (602) 712-7006.